CONTEMPORARY ARABIC LITERATURE

SALAH ABDUL-SABOOR

NIGHT TRAVELLER

(A BLACK COMEDY)

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with an introduction by
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INTRODUCTION
by
SAMIR SARHAN

Salah Abdul Saboor, Egypt's foremost contemporary poet, was born in 1931. In 1951, he graduated from the Department of Arabic, Cairo University, where he studied classical Arabic literature, especially poetry.

Since his early boyhood, Sȃlah Abdul Saboor tried his hand at writing poetry , but his talent did not reach full maturity until the early 1950's. Though his regular education enabled him to develop a deep awareness of the long tradition of classical Arabic poetry, his distinctively modern sensibility, was the result of wide reading in European poetry, especially that of the *symbolists* and T. S Eliot.

Abdul Saboor's first collection, *People of my Country* (1957) marked a break with rigid verse forms of classical Arabic poetry and started an important movement now termed «modern poetry». His innovation in Arabic metrics, which has since taken root and become more or less the «norm», consisted in a rejection of the old practice of having equal lines with a single rhyme throughout, in favour of the freer variety with lines of unequal length and different rhyme. As a consequence, a great controversy arose in the late 1950's and early 60's between «the

classicists and the moderns», from which the advocates of the modern movement emerged victorious. That «modern poetry» has come to be the dominant trend may be considered the personal triumph of Salah Abdul Saboor.

Since 1957, Salah Abdul Saboor's work has been rich, varied and very influential. Not only did he write lyrical poetry but he also attempted the dramatic monologue, the 'dialogue' poem, and finally the full-blooded verse drama. He also wrote a number of books in literary Criticism and biography and edited a number of literary magazines.

Among his collections of poetry are: *This I say to you* (1961), *Dreams of the Ancient Knight* (1964), *Meditations on Injured Times* (1969), *Night Trees* (1974), and *Sailing into Memory* (1979). He wrote five verse dramas most of which were produced professionally by the National Theatre and The Pocket Theatre in Cairo: *The Tragedy of al-Hallaj* (1964), *Knight Traveller and A Princess Waiting* (1969), *Laila and the Majnoun* (1970) and *After the King is Dead* (1971).

At the time *Night Traveller* was conceived, the theatre of the absurd was in vogue in Egyptain cultural circles. The works of Becket, Ionesco and others were produced on the Egyptian stage from the mid-sixties and their influence resulted in the attempt to adopt absurdist techniques in rendering human experience.

In the best tradition of the Absurd Theatre, Salah Abdul Saboor's «black comedy» Night traveller is a drama of metamorphosis and victimization. In a desolate world deviod of order and meaning, man is seen as victim of external malignant forces which would not only dehumanize him but compel him to sur-

render to an absurdist death. Thus the passenger's life is sacrificed to an order of existence where «the ten-coat man» rules supreme while the Narrator, a modern chorus figure, watches indifferently. The metamorphosis of the conductor from a simple civil servant to a historical despot who usurps God's place on earth, embodies the poet's view of a universe which, in the flux of history, has lost both moral law and meaning.

The action of *Night Traveller* unfolds in a night train, a simple symbol of a barren and senseless journey into the darkness of a meaningless existence. The narrator introduces the passenger as «everyman», who possesses no special marks of individuality. Like every «modern» man:

He fidgets in boredom: the game has no appeal!

He tries instead to toy with his memories; He digs up rusty ones and tries to polish them. But, how sad and sorry! His memories do not shine.

So now he knows it : his life's been colourless.

The frustrating emptiness of the passenger's life is suddenly filled with the invocation of historical despots; Alexander, Hannibal, Tamerlane, Hitler and Lyndon Johnson, who can be summoned from the memory of history «To impose their greatness and dominate the humble». The typically Ionescan rubric of memory, metamorphosis and stasis is used by the playwright in transforming the conductor, through the passenger's attempt to escape from a static life into memory, from a diligent civil servant into the prototype of a historical tyrant – Alexander: As the metamorphosis is completed, the conductor emerges by the end

of the play as the «ten-coat» man himself, apparently a modern military dictator who robs the humble» of their very identity.

As the action unfolds, certain startling events place the conductor-passenger relationship in a historical perspective and relate it to the Nietzschean notion of the death of God, so central to much of contemporary thought, and especially to the basic mental disposition of the absurdists. After the opening scene where the passenger is intimidated by the conductor who assumes the character of Alexander, he reverts to his original identity and asks for the former's train ticket. In a startling movement he eats it then denies what he did. A little later, he asks for the passenger's identity card, but afraid lest it should be eaten as well, the passenger refuses. As the conductor exclaims that nobody has even heard of eating paper, the narrator intervenes to confirm that:

This is not true, ...

The most delicious food for man, as yet, is paper

And the most appetizing part of it is *history*

We devour it all the time and everywhere,

only to rewrite it on different paper,

Still to devour it later on.

(Italics mine)

History, as paper usually devoured, or usurped by such despots represented by the conductor, is a process in which both moral law and human identity are lost. If the flux of history is supposed to impose an ordered pattern on human existence, it becomes in Salah Abdul Saboor's play a tool in the hands of the conductor-dictator to dehumanize the common run of people.

Closely related to this situation is the playwright's use of the modern notion of the death of God. At the outset, describing the passenger's restlessness «as he drops his days» in the bleak journey of the night train, the narrator refers to his failure to hold on to his rosary, the symbol of religious faith :

Narrator : He remembers his rosary

Takes it out from the right hand pocket

of his trousers

But the beads fall down, and his fingers reach

out for them.

They escape and settle in a gap between two seats,

He tries hard to recover them, but they sink, deeper and deeper still, until chased by his fumbling fingers,they scatter all over the floor.

In the final stages of the action, the passenger is taken to ask by the conductor, who wears and gradually reveals layers of Khaki coats, on the question of who has killed God in this part of the world and stolen his identity card (1).

Conductor:

Abduh!

Stand up and listen to the charge!

You have killed God

And stolen his identity card.

(1) The layers of khaki coats indicate not only a simple symbolism of the conductor's military identity but the deeper significance of the shifting attitudes in a changing world where no absolute moral law is possible.

As the conductor finally reveals his tenth coat to establish his identity as absolute dictator, and ironically laments his fortune for having to lead a lonely life at the top, afraid of being killed by friends and foes alike, he decides to make a scapegoat of the innocent passenger :

Conductor :

The point now is, however,

That God has forsaken this part of the universe !

He never looks this way now as he was wont to do

He never gives us anything now !

We've wondered what has happened,

And the answer is : Someone has killed

God in these parts!...

Do you realize how serious it is?

How it calls for self-abnegation?

Passenger:

Very much, my Lord!

Conductor:

Are you willing to do something for me then?

That «something» the passenger is asked to do in the spirit of self-abnegation is, of course, to surrender to a senseless death inflicted by the ten-coat man who, as a result, would declare to his people that the culprit has been caught and killed. Ironically, however just before he stabs the passenger with a dagger, a method which, in his opinion, retains for death its splendour and grandeur, the conductor-dictator discloses that he himself is

the one who had killed God and stolen his identity card. This final revelation renders the passenger a tragic victim of the dictator's usurpation of God's place on earth.

In Nietzche's system, the death of the biblical God does not mean that God does not exist but that he is no longer in force in the lives of men. This concept is used by the conductor when he declares that God has forsaken this part of the world without discussing the complex problem of God's existence. That God «never looks this way now as He was wont to do», intimates in Abdul Saboor's play, the Nietzchean idea that modern man ceased to live in a world where the biblical God is in and beyond history. In the hands of a ten-coat dictator, history becomes a mere tool and the absence of God, regardless of whether He exists or not, results in a state of chaos where the moral order is violated and man falls victim to purposeless existence leading to an absurd death.

Structurally, the play depends on a well-known technique of the theatre of the absurd: reversed roles and shifting identities. At the very core of the Absurd theatre, identity is a problem which defies definition in a meaningless order of existence. In *Night Traveller*, the passenger becomes, at once, everyman, clown, worshipper, court entertainer, obedient subject and victim. The train conductor's shifting identity, however, takes on a more logical progression within the framework of the playwright's implied discussion of the ills of military dictatorship. The conductor is presented as at once Alexander, an American Sheriff, four-coat law enforcing officer and finally ten coat man responsible for the death of God. Representing the many faces of oppression in a Godless world, the conductor's shifting identity enables the playwright to conduct the action with terrifying finality to the end.

At the same time, the fine balance of tragedy and comedy results from this very shifting of identities. The passenger, in his assumption of various identities, is both clown and tragic victim. Moments of pure comedy arise from his clownish entertainment of the ten coat man when asked to enumerate his virtues.

The conductor's metamorphosis from a simple train man to historical military dictator is comic, if not ironical. Yet, his ascendancy is a tragic fact of our times.

The narrator's role as chorus and commentator intensifies the tragi-comic nature of the action. As a detached observer, the narrator analyses the situation and throws light on the motives of characters. When the final moment comes when his involvement in the tragic death of the passenger becomes imperative, his assumed indifference to the situation becomes ridiculous as he helps the conductor, willingly, to remove the body of the murdered passenger. Perhaps the playwright meant the narrator to represent the general indifference of the layman to the central problems of the age.

Jean Cocteau once referred to the poetry of the theatre as opposed to poetry in the theatre. *Night Traveller* is a poetic drama which does not lack the poetry of the theatre; it achieves that penetration into the depth of contemporary reality and that universality which are the works of true poetry.

Dr. Enani's translation is, indeed, excellent. Combining a surprising faithfulness to the text with a sensitive response to the complexities of meaning, the translation renders Salah Abdul Saboor's style and thought most effectively into English. In translation, the play loses nothing of its vigour, depth and effect.

NIGHT TRAVELLER

Scene : Train carriage, in movement. The noise of the engine provides the only background music.

Time : Just after midnight.

Characters :

Narrator

Passenger

Conductor

On one side of the stage, that is, in the corner of the carriage, the narrator stands. He is primly dressed: a very elegant modern suit, a buttonhole or a fashionable tie, a striped waistcoat or a gold watch with a gold strap. He could be wearing all of these. His face is suffused with tepid serenity, his voice metallic but lined with shrewd indifference.

On a seat somewhere in the carriage the passenger sits. He is a type – a non-dimensional man, that is, a man who can be described only from the outside, as fat or thin, tall or squat dark or fair, though it all amounts, in fact, to the same thing.

The conductor, who will soon appear, has a round face and a round body. He looks suspiciously innocent.

Narrator:

The hero, the clown, of our play is a man called...

Well, he's called what he's called.

What's in a name ? ... a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.

And a hedgehog by any other name

Would roll itself up... all the same !

His line of business.. any line of business !
We can judge, from his appearance and his attire, that ...

But, really, it's of no consequence !
Let's keep it at that, then ... any line of business !
He's going somewhere by train, at night,
(Managed to catch the last train, in fact)
And now is counting the telegraph poles, one, two
Three, five, a hundred ...
He fidgets in boredom: the game has no appeal !
He tries instead to toy with his memories;
He digs up rusty ones and tries to polish them.
But, how unfortunate ! His memories do not shine;
So now he knows it: his life's been colourless !
From his eyes he drops his days
They vanish in ever-widening circles on the metallic floor
They don't break up, however, or splinter;
For nothing solid falls down,
Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, !

He remembers his rosary

Takes it out from the right-hand pocket of his trousers

But the beads fall down, and his fingers reach out for them.

They escape and settle in a gap between two seats;

He tries hard to recover them, but string snaps, and they sink deeper and deeper still,

Until, chased by his fumbling fingers, they scatter all over the floor,

Falling down, tick-tock, tick-tock !

A parchment he now takes out from his coat,

Wherein history has been recorded in a mere ten lines.

A few names arrest his attention,

The black embossed letters

Shine on the wrinkled leather.

Passenger :

Alexander

Tick-tock !

Hannibal

Tick-tock !

Tamerlane

Tick-tock !

Hitler, Mitler;Johnson, Monson;

Tick-tock, tick-tock !

Alexander , Alexander , Alexander !

Narrator :

Excuse me ! A man is one with his name !

Great men can come back if you summon them from the memory of history

To impose their greatness and dominate the humble

And the humble can come back, if you summon them from your memory

To be trampled underfoot by the great !

It is better therefore to forget the past

So that it won't deceive us

And repeat itself !

Passenger :

Alexander – tick-tock

Alexander – tick-tock, tick-tock !

(Raises his voice, as though relishing the tune; meanwhile a spotlight on the other corner of the carriage, opposite the narrator, reveals the co-ductor wearing his traditional khaki uniform).

Conductor :

Who's shouting out my name ? Who's calling me ?

Who has disturbed my sleep in the corner of the carriage?

You... ?

Passenger :

I beg your pardon ! Who are you ?

Conductor :

Alexander the Great !

As a boy I broke in wild colts,

In my prime I broke Aristotle in,

When I came of age I broke the world in !

Narrator :

The passenger is astonished –

Open mouth and raised eye-brows –

Like a painted face on a poster !

He is even afraid,

Though, to be fair, just a little.

He says to himself :

Passenger :

That swarthy barrel in that khaki sack .. Alexander ?

Oh, no !

Narrator :

The passenger's heart is divided

As the scales of a balance,

And he moves merely to help his suspicion

Outweigh his fear

Passenger :

Welcome Alexander ! Been drinking, haven't you?

Had one too many, I bet ?

Conductor :

Ignorant ! Don't you know my real worth ?

I'll break you in, I swear, as I broke in the wild colts !

Narrator :

Alexander's hand goes into his right-hand pocket:

Takes out a folded whip ;

Alexander's hand goes into his left-hand pocket :

Takes out a dagger ;

Alexander's hand goes to his belt:

Takes out a revolver;

Alexander's hand goes to his throat :

Takes out a poison tube ;

Alexander's hand goes into a back pocket :

Takes out a rope ;

This, however, he feels with embarrassment and says :

Conductor :

Forgive me ! This has killed my dearest friend !

I gave the rope to my friend, just to play with it, you know.

But he misused it !

Do you know ? The tribute I paid him on his death

Has passed for a literary masterpiece ;

I didn't write the tribute myself, mind you,

But I watched my minister do it ;

I ordered bread and wine for him until he finished it,

And until he taught me to deliver it tragically

And grammatically ;

Grammer is not my strong point, you see;

My minister was ambitious, however, and asked for a province

In return for my going down in history as a writer

Well, I gave him the whole earth wherein he lies:

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

(The conductor hides the rope inside his cap)

Narrator :

The scene may be summed up as follows

The passenger is feverish with fear;

The expression on his face changes

Like traffic lights

Alexander has mobilized his army

Right-hand flank : the whip and the poison tube

Left-hand flank : the revolver and the dagger ;

We daren't, of course, mention what's in his cap :

It could upset him.

Conductor :

Nobody dares disobey my orders, do you ?

Passenger :

No, my Lord !
Give me your orders
And I'll be quicker than your echo !

Narrator :

Who knows, the passenger thought,
The man may indeed be Alexander the Great !
Great men, though dead,
May still be alive !
These are funny days, anyway,
And it is wiser to be cautious.
Perhaps if I give way he'll leave me alone,
The passenger said to himself,
Let me humble myself to him.

Passenger :

What do you want from me my Lord ?
I beg your pardon, people like you can't want anything
From people like me !
What I mean is : which way is your kindness inclined ?
How would you honour me ?

Would you make me saddle for your horse ?

Conductor :

I am bored with riding.

Passenger :

How about an insole for your shoe ?

Conductor :

I rarely walk now; I suffer from lumbago :

Sometimes I bask in the sun, and have a steam bath every morning

Passenger :

Let me heat the water for your bath

Let me take care of your rosy towels

Let me carry your golden slippers around for you

But don'kill me ... please !

Narrator :

The conductor irritably drops his weapons,

Lazily stretches his empty hands

To the passenger

Passenger :

Kill me with bare hands. Oh, no !

Please ! try me at anything !

Give me the meanest job,

Trust me with the biggest,

Do what you like with me,

But don't kill me !

Conductor :

What's the matter with you ?

What are you screaming about Mr. ....

Having a bad dream, are you ?

Why do you cower like a frightened mouse ?

Haven't you ever been on a train before ?

Goodness ! Why do you grow so white when I put out my hand to you !

Don't you know what I want ?

Can't you think who I am ?

Passenger :

You're Alexander the Great !

Conductor :

My name is not Alexander ;

My name is Zahwan (1)

Passenger :

What are your orders my Lord ... the Zahwan ?

Conductor :

You're cowardly and stupid !

Can't you tell from my uniform what I want ?

Your ticket, please !

This is my job, hard work ;

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(1) The name literally means: vainglorious ...

Drags me out of my bed in the middle of the night,
Deprives me of sleep, the most delicious bread on God's table !
Sometimes there would only be a handful of passengers
Scattered about the carriage like cotton sacs in a deserted warehouse ;
Sometimes only a man or two,
And the carriage would be dark, cold and breathless,
Like the inside of a dead whale !
I would know this when, standing on the platform,
I hear the rumbling of the train, pulling in,
The lights off, and the frosted window-panes revealing no human head !
I get on all the same and search all carriages
It's my duty, you see !
I feel all the seats and stare in the dark;
Sometimes I turn a seat upside down,
Sometimes I kneel down to see what's under it,
Sometimes I plunge my pen-knife into the seat !
Indeed ! I can't allow anyone to be on without a ticket !
Have you calmed down yet ?
Your ticket, please !

(Passenger forgets where he has put his ticket. He searches his pockets, one after another, but finally finds it in his hand.)

Passenger :

There !

Conductor :

Thank you. It's a green ticket

And almost square,

And soft !

This means you're a good man

Do you know ? After my evening prayer I had a nap !

I was properly dressed,

Ready to go to bed, I mean,

When a bell rang in my head ;

I jumped out of bed,

Having had nothing to eat.

Green ; thank you.

You embarrass me by putting me before yourself.

Good manners win me over, thank you !

Narrator :

Attention, please!

A most fantastic thing will happen :

The conductor open his mouth, wipes the ticket clean,

Tastes it with the tip of his tongue,

Finds it delicious, takes bite after bite,
Chews, swallows and belches.
His hand feels his stomach and,
Gratified, both hands feel his tummy ;
He says a little prayer
And kisses the palm of his hand, as a sign of gratitude.
In shocked surprise, the passenger's unable to think ;
He doesn't know what to think,
He doesn't know what to think,

Conductor :

Your ticket, please !

Passenger :

I gave it to you !

Conductor :

And where may I ask is it now ?

Passenger :

In your tummy !

Conductor :

Ceremony is lifted only between friends
Now ! know your limits !
You're being sarcastic, I'm sure,
But sarcasm will do you no good ;

Your sense of humour may amuse me, indeed,
But within limits
Duty will always be duty

Passenger :

But I did give it to you, I swear

Conductor :

And I threw it out of the window ?

Passenger :

No, indeed ! You are –

Conductor :

What ? I what ?
Well, I'm too old to lose my temper,
Old enough to let my reason rule my emotion,
But I can never allow my reason to break the law !
So now ! Will you listen, Mr.

Passenger :

Abduh (1)

Conductor :

Listen Abduh
Let's discuss this thorny subject
As friends

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(1) Literally 'servant of God'

As fellow travellers
And not as opponents
(Which this regrettable situation entails, that is, a passenger and a conductor).
Well, then, move over and I'll sit by you.
But let me take off my coat first
So that you won't be afraid of me.
Some people, I know, are allergic to yellow,
Take my advice as a friend
Don't talk of anything against your will;
Weigh your words carefully, as in a balance;
Think a dozen times of each question,
And a hundred times of each answer;
Beware of tangles of speech: words unclear
Can turn into ropes around your neck;
But, let's tarry, until I have taken off this uniform.

Narrator :

The conductor takes off his coat;
There is another one under it;
The conductor takes off his second coat,
But another one still appears:
We still see yellow !

Which reminds me : I must comment on this colour !

Views on this are divided :

Some believe it is the colour of glittering gold;

Others believe it is the colour of sickness,

Of a swallow complexion,

The colour of death.

Conductor :

(Seating himself by the passenger)

That's better !

Now, having removed this uniform

We can talk as friends.

What did you say your name was ?

Passenger :

Abduh

Conductor :

Mine is Sultan

Passenger :

Zahwan you said it was !

Conductor :

Me ? Zahwan ? Goodness, no !

That's my superior's name;

His rank is four-coats

I often dream I'd killed him and taken his place.

His wife has a white complexion and plump thighs,

Mine is old and bony .

He lives in the sunny part, west of the rosy district,

My home is all right, though I'm sometimes disturbed by the shouting pedestrians and howling cars

What's your line of business ?

Passenger :

I am a craftsman.

Conductor :

A craftsman ?

My parents never bothered; I could never be apprenticed

As a craftsman ! All I can do is search the cars !

Haven't missed much, any way; the pay is good, and the grading.

Goes up to the ten-coat rank.

What was your name you said ?

Passenger :

Abduh

Conductor :

Your name is not Abduh ! You're lying !

Passenger :

But I am Abduh ! I swear !

My father is Abdullah, my eldest son Abed,

My youngest Abbad, and family name Abdoon ! (1)

Conductor :

Have you an identity card ?

Passenger :

I always keep it in my right-hand pocket;

It's easier to reach for here, being demanded and seen

A dozen times a day ! One day it was demanded eighty six times !

And seventy on another day

Conductor :

No more than ninety, by law !

One has to be crystal clear,

To reveal oneself unequivocally !

For every question, we must be ready with an answer

That doesn't lead to another question !

The sound fruit in the basket are not disturbed

By the hands which remove the bad ones !

You're apparently a good man;

Keep this card always nearest to your right-hand;

It is your identity card,

(1) The names are symbolic, being variations on the root verb Abada, 'to serve'. The derivatives are puns on the meaning of 'servant', 'slave' etc.

Your most precious possession.

Show it to me for a second, please;

Thank you. Green and nearly square

But dry !

Quite all right, though.

Do you know after my evening prayer I had a nap,

I was properly dressed, ready to go to bed, I mean,

When a bell rang in my head,

I jumped out of bed, having had nothing to eat.

Green ; thank you. Quite all right.

(Conductor raises the card to his lips; passenger shakes with terror)

Passenger :

Please ! Don't eat it, please !

Conductor :

Eat it?

I thought you were a man who, well, who had some sense left!

Eat it? Goodness gracious me ! Eat it

Can anyone eat a card ?

This is unheard of !

We've heard of eating horses' meat, desert locusts, frogs' legs,

Sea weeds, and, sometimes, how cruel, of eating the flesh of the living or the dead,

But we never heard of eating paper !

Narrator :

This is not true,

Sorry for the interruption,

But I have to make another comment :

The most delicious food for man, as yet, is paper !

And the most appetizing part of it is history ;

We devour it all the time and everywhere,

Only to rewrite it on different paper,

Still to devour it later on.

Conductor :

I am surprised at you ;

I thought you had better understanding

But I shan't be hard on you,

Shan't censure you much

For the friendship you so cheaply threw away, before it hadn't even taken shape!

I am forced, dear sir,

To be formal with you.

However, as a responsible official,

Of the three-coat rank,

I have to abide by the words of our superior,

Of the ten-coat rank;

I remember his words to us when he handed each his appointment papers.

Narrator :

I know these words by heart

Among other pearls of wisdom,

Such as :

«Keep your dog hungry : he'll follow thee »

Master Nu'man Ibn al-Mundhir

«When I hear the word culture I feel for my pistol»

Master Hermann Ibn Goering

«Teach them democracy, even if you had to kill them all »

Master Lyndon Ibn Johnson

«I can see heads that are ripe and ready for the picking»

Al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf

The words of the ten-coat man himself, however, were :

«Leniently investigate : severely castigate».

Conductor :

(Raising his hand in salute)

Here am I, your ten-coat highness,

The soul of leniency, the milk of human kindness!

To this man, ill-disguised

By a transparent mask of stupidity,
Let me say :
I had no intention of eating your card
When I raised it to my face ;
I was just staring at it,
Am still staring at it,
Still staring at it,
Hell and damnation! What is this ?

Narrator :

There's a mystery somewhere,
There's a mystery somewhere,
The conductor has thrown away the card on the floor,
Panicking or, apparently in panic !

Conductor :

This is a blank piece of paper !
Only one individual
Can have such blank papers ;
An individual who has existed from time immemorial,
Hasn't existed, as yet,
Or never, indeed, existed,
Though we hear of him everywhere !
Some people saw him,

Or thought they sometimes saw him;

Some have spoken to him the way I speak to you now,

Some claim to have one day spoken to him.

Passenger :

(Picks the paper from the floor and points at it as he talks)

But my papers are not blank :

This is my name ;

And this is what l look like !

Conductor :

Oh, no ! Your papers are blank ! Look !

Perfectly blank, look !

Can't you recognize your own papers ?

Oh, I see now!

They are NOT your papers !

You've stolen them- just a minute -

This is serious !

Narrator :

The conductor takes out from one of his pockets

The badge of an American Sheriff and pins it to his chest;

He turns his seat round to face the passenger,

Pulls out a shelf from under the seat

And makes it into a table

He puts some papers on it.
He takes out a few pens from the back pocket of his trousers,
Lights a cigarette, and twirls his moustache,
Wetting it or using a little ointment from a bottle
Which he takes out of the back pocket of his trousers,
He clears his throat haughtily and says :

Conductor :

Abduh !
Stand up and listen to the charge !
You have killed God
And stolen his identity card,
And I, Ulwan Ibn Zahwan Ibn Sultan,
Chief law-enforcing officer
In this part of the world,
In your name, O Ten-Coat Man,
I declare the court in session.

Passenger :

Oh, no! I havent't !
I plead not guilty !
I appeal to the Ten-Coat Man himself,
I want his Justice !

Conductor :

Just a minute !

For justice to be done,

Certain formalities have to be observed!

Narrator :

That is right!

Justice without formalities

Is like a woman unpainted,

Like a stage (even like this one of ours) without curtains!

And this is why the conductor jumps up to sit on the luggage net

Hangs down his legs, and swings his boots over the passenger's head

Don't be surprised; this too is right;

It's been said that the law is above the heads of individuals

Passenger :

Innocent, I swear! Innocent, Innocent!

Never killed anybody or stolen anything!

Help me, Ten-Coat Man!

Conductor :

Are you calling the Ten-Coat Man himself?

Passsenger :

I'm Innocent ! Innocent !

Conductor :

I am the Ten-Coat Man! Look!

Narrator :

The conductor unbuttons his coat-

Once, twice ... seven times over !

The buttons shine through right up to his skin !

Passenger :

Justice! Ten-Coat Man!

Conductor :

So you want my justice ?

What do you know of my justice ?

Passenger :

Your justice is unequalled on this earth !

Conductor :

Not bad !

Speak of my kindness to the weak !

Passenger :

« You're as kind as a mother or a father,

Such indeed is real kindness !»

Conductor :

That's even better ;

Speak of my knowledge !

Passenger :

«He knows the secrets of languages and religions;

His meditations puts all to shame, both men and books»

Conductor :

Good .. Good!

What about my generosity ?

Passenger :

«If he had nothing left to give away but his life,

He would gladly do it! So fear the Lord when ye approach him!»

Conductor :

Oh, no! This is reckless !

I can't give away my life! Not to anyone !

Not because I'm a niggard, but I just wouldn't want

To upset the cosmic order !

Keeping it, my friend, is quite a responsibility!

Is this your verse ?

Passenger :

No, by the Majesty of your Glory!

They are lines of dull and insipid doggerel

Which survive in my memory from boyhood!

Conductor :

You know the author ?

Passenger :

Al-Mutanabbi, if I remember rightly !

Conductor :

Certainly not ! My intuition never fails me !

This sounds like al-Aa'im

Sha'baan Ibn al-Aa'im

Narrator :

The passenger proves tactful;

He picks one of the conductor's pens,

Pretends to be fascinated by this information,

And asks in fawning tones :

Passenger :

Who, my Lord ?

Conductor :

Sha'baan Al-Aa'im !

A journalist in my entourage .

He's fit for nothing except this hollow prattle,

But it amuses me.

Do you know.. I am not happy !

Some fools imagine I am lucky

When they go back in the evening

To their shacks and sheds;

They often wonder :

«What is it that the ten-coat man does?

«'. receives the highest salary,
« ves in a palace
Controls the destinies of people .. etc.»
They don't know that I bear the heaviest burden,
That I jump out of bed in the middle of the night
If something happens,
I leave my palace to find out for myself how things are!
I retain in my mind the names of killers and murderers,
And those who have wicked ideas which are more dangerous
Than the most dangerous killers and murderers !
I receive the strangers who visit our country,
I suffer their dumb malicious looks;
I have coffee with every caller,
Even with my enemies,
I have two hundred cups a day ;
My digestion is ruined : I live on a diet of boiled vegetables!
Do you know that sometimes
I have to go without sleep, except for a few hours a week !
Oh, I don't want you to think I'm afraid of being killed in bed!
I am not afraid of death,

But one must be careful ;

And that is why I kill my enemies or buy them off, alternatively!

Indeed, I'm not afraid of my enemies;

I'm afraid of my friends, rather!

Their hearts are gnawed by envy,

They may smile in my face

But black spite will remain in their hearts.

I am lonely;

It's a lonely life,

I am lonely !

Passenger :

Don't be sorry for yourself, my Lord!

Conductor :

Oh ! I am not sorry for myself !

I am sorry for the envious who have lost their souls!

I deplore their black hearts

And wish they could see the light, know the light!

If only they knew what it means for a heart to be pure.

To be purified by love !

Passenger :

Cheer up, my Lord !

Your tears are too precious
To be shed in pity for bad people !

Conductor :

That's right
You're apparently a good man;
Just a minute .

Narrator :

The conductor gets down from the shelf
And sits beside the passenger;
The passenger believes it is a hopeful sign,
Believes that his humility is about to save his neck!

Conductor :

Let's talk as friends!
Perhaps you'll forgive my looking so closely into your case.
My telling you of a rumour
The veracity of which I cannot determine.

Passenger :

Ascertain its veracity, my Lord!
You're so shrewd, so very clever!

Conductor :

This is precisely what I am doing !
Now look ! Try to appreciate my position!
I am responsible for this entire valley,
And the rumour says that one valley dweller

Has killed God and stolen his identity card!

Passenger :

This is the most awful thing anybody's ever heard !

The rumour is false, no doubt, my Lord !

Conductor :

Well, it isn't, unfortunately!

It is quite true, though indirectly so!

Passenger :

But how ? If you'll pardon my poor understanding !

What do you mean, my Lord ?

Conductor :

I appreciate your interest in the case ;

Let me clarify the matter to you.

Passenger :

Thanks, my Lord.

Conductor :

Don't mention it !

Well, now ! Do you know what it means to lose your identity card ?

It means that you don't exist !

Whoever steals it kills you

By depriving you of your specific individuality !

Passenger :

Forgive my ignorance, my Lord !

What is the meaning of that expression ?

Conductor :

Your very existence ! It means depriving you of your existence !

Understand ?

Now when I say «You have killed God» I do not mean, of course.

That (may God forgive me !) you have ...

Certainly not ! What I mean, rather, is that you have stolen

His identity card – Which amounts to the same thing !

Passenger :

But I never did anything of the sort !

Conductor :

Ah, well ! That's another story !

We'll discuss it later on !

The point now is, however,

That God has forsaken this part of the universe !

He never looks this way now as He was wont to do

He never gives us anything now !

We've wondered what has happened,

And the answer is : someone has killed God in these parts !

This is why He has abandoned us !

What I mean of course is that someone

Has stolen his card and assumed His identity !

We decided first to investigate the matter in secret;

We did

We examined every file,

Tapped all telephone conversations,

Photocopied all letters,

Held thousands,

Tortured twenty till dead,

Tortured thirty till maimed,

Tortured eighty till fainted,

To no avail !

Passenger :

Were there any confessions ?

Conductor :

A few. A hundred, as far as I remember,

To no avail .

Passenger :

But how ? I mean, why not ?

Conductor :

Well, God still abandons us !

It is serious indeed !

So much so, in fact, that I, the ten-coat man, no less,

Have disguised myself in workers' overalls,

Or in peasant rags,

Walked down the valleys

Or sank in the depth of alleys

Reached the top floors by back stairs

Eaves-dropped on people behind walls,

Painted my face white and played

At fire-walking at hashish-takers dens,

In the hope of overhearing

A tell-tale word, or getting a clue,

Which might unravel the mystery !

I hoped a door might open, even a secret passage,

Leading to the unknown !

Look ! Here we are ! Such a pair !

A common pleb of the valley,

And the ten-coat man himself,

Sitting side by side,

Shoulder to shoulder,

Talking like old friends –

Who knows ? Perhaps you'll reveal the secret to me.

Do you realize how serious it is ?

How it calls for self-abnegation ?

Passenger :

Very much, my Lord ?

Conductor :

Are you willing to do something for me then ?

For the whole of the valley, rather ?

Passenger :

Indeed ! Anything for you, my Lord !

Let me join you in the search !

Conductor :

Join me in the search ?

Passenger :

If you'll allow me, my Lord !

Conductor :

But we've found him already !

Here he is !

Passenger :

Who, my Lord ?

Conductor :

You ! But, please ! Wait ! I'd like you to get my meaning in full :

The whole question had been a carefully guarded secret,
Strictly confined to a number of my closest associates,
But it soon broke loose !
The grievous thing was reported to my enemies,
My enemies spread it far and wide,
And everybody came to know about it !
That is why we hardly have time to distinguish
Those who tell the truth from the liars !
We have to be decisive,
Otherwise the order of the valley will be upset ;
I know what I am doing ;
I'll tell everybody in tomorrow's papers
That I myself have caught the culprit
And killed him !
Your photograph will be published
And your body will lie in state
You're a good man,
You're of the noblest quality
Worthy of the great sacrifice
You're willing to do something for me, remember ?
Let us forget about it now ;
We'll discuss it later on !

Let me ask you a question

Your answer will show your taste !

Let us suppose then that you have a choice

Between four methods, or instruments, of death :

The whip ...

Passenger :

Oh, no !

Conductor :

You have no taste for it ?

You're quite right !

It's barbarian, even backward,

Ah, Tamerlane, the barbarian !

What do you think of poison ?

Passenger :

Oh, no !

Conductor :

Doesn't agree with you, either ?

You're right !

It is a method tinged with meanness and treachery

The Medici method

What about the revolver ?

No, no ! I don't like it myself ;

It's killing from a distance ; lacks the warmth of touch !
A vulgar modern method,
A game for the young and cowardly !
What we need is a classical method,
If death is to retain its splendour, its grandeur,
Ah ! The dagger !
Alexander !
I am sorry Abduh !
O noblest man,
Let the dagger touch thee,
Let the dagger pierce thee !

(stabs him with a dagger)

Narrator :

I have no power to talk
And I advise you too to be silent
Perfectly silent.

Passenger :

But we haven't discussed it yet

Conductor :

Oh, we'll discuss it later on

Passenger :

I swear I never killed anybody, never stole anything

I swear, I swear...

Conductor :

I know that, noblest and purest !

Do you know who killed God and stole his identity card ?

Well, I can't reveal his name, though I could, I believe

Well! Open your eyes for the last time,

Cast a look for the last time!

(The conductor unbuttons his undercoat ; from a pocket therein closest to his bare chest he takes out a blank card, and waves it before the eyes of the dying man. The passenger looks at it once and drops dead).

Conductor:

Ah well! How am I going to carry the heavy body of this man?

(Approaching the narrator)

You there! Could you lend a hand?

Come on, let us carry him together!

Narrator:

(To the audience)

What should I do?

What can I do?
He holds a dagger;
But I am unarmed, like you;
I have nothing but my commentary;
What should I do?
What can I do?

POSTSCRIPT
by
SALAH ABDUL-SABOOR

If I had to direct this play, I would do it within the tradition of 'farce': I would like the audience to 'fear' the conductor with a smile on their faces, to 'pity' the passenger, to 'love' and 'despise' the narrator, in the same jovial mood.

I do not intend to introduce fully developed, 'sound' or 'healthy' characters in this play: I mean them to be types. Indeed, they are not so much types of people as they are types of *mankind* – a hair-splitting distinction, you'll conclude, but I mean my types, the groundwork of my play, to have a measure of abstraction which should set them at a distance from actual or real people. In this I have the abstract model of a jest or joke where the confrontation between types serves to bring out inherent contradictions.

When I first thought of this work I was not sure whether to choose the form of the regular poem, the form of dialogue, or the full-blooded stage play. Opting for the last, several problems emerged which I hadn't pondered (I never do, actually). The actual process of writing, however, produced solutions for them which could have been lurking somewhere in my mind and couldn't come to light except on paper.

Why poetry to begin with?

Well, because poetry has always been the medium of drama until the last century, and because drama has recently been trying to go back to the original sources, helped by the change in the meaning of poetry, where poetry has ceased to be synonymous with verse. Indeed, the difference between verse and poetry has come to be deeper than that between poetry and prose-in so far that the difference between poetry and prose is formal whereas poetry and verse differ in vision approach and realization.

The question of poetry and drama does not refer us, however, to a ready-made case: it is rich, intricate and has had (and will continue to have) many ramifications. It may be easy to say that poetic drama has been written by Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Christopher Fry, W. H. Auden, Maeterlinck, Beckett, Shehada, etc..., but, if we focus on how poetry is related to drama in each, we shall find them as vastly different as the writers of prose drama. The central difference will relate to the role of poetry: is it a mood? Is it a style? Or is it the *verbal noise* itself? Indeed, we can find in the same author various approaches and uses of poetry in drama. So, while T. S. Eliot in his *Murder'in the Cathedral* produces a 'Condensed', rythmically rich play, which acquires an air of grandeur from its stylized characters and the ritual verbal drama accompanying ritual action (which is again an attempt at taking drama back to its origins), he tries in his later plays from *The Cocktail Party* onward, to use poetry as the general framework of the work, with a minimum of audible verse rhythms, which secures a measure of elevation for the language while being so consistently unobtrusive that the reader may wonder whether it is verse at all.

This may indeed be related to other characters chosen by the author. Why we believe that elevation in public life entails a grand style, i.e., that social eminence necessarily brings about linguistic superiority. I can't imagine! It's an artistic fallacy we have been brought up on, as a result of a class consciousness so deeply ingrained, that the derivative 'classic' has come to mean 'better', more refined and even ideal. Language can, in fact, be high and refined not on account of the dramatic fact, be high and refined not on account of the class to which characters belong, but because the dramatic situation they 'half-create'.

The main point is that dramatic poets are vastly different. Leaving Eliot aside, we find in the French a strain of poetic symbolism which relies more on suggestiveness and nuances than on character revelation. Another style, so different again, is that of Christopher Fry, wherein verse does accommodate 'verbal niceties and figures of speech-from antithesis to oxymoron. His poetic style is easily reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's prose style–a style which has its own charm.

There is no single approach to poetic drama, therefore, even among those well versed in this medium. What about us, Arabs? I tend to believe that we are still trying to get to grips with the problem. My play could have been written in prose and with better effect, but prose, I believe, could have caused it to lose much. The metre I have chosen for its base rhythm is so common as to pass unnoticed, but it has a role to play which is enhanced, I am sure, by the amount of modulations it affords. This, however, is of minor significance. The metre is essentially a formality: another is the stock-in-trade of all poets, namely, the poeticisms we have been brought up to accept, such as im-

agery, symbolism, 'enhancing suggestions', 'syntactical fluidity', etc. To the long list of Arabic poeticisms we can add the modern techniques: soliloquies, condensed expressions, epigramatic phrases, etc. I can never claim that I have anything of the sort in my play. Indeed, I have been most careful to avoid all this as best I could, for I have had, consistently, two things in mind: The first was to try and imagine that the 'people' of my play are able to speak in verse; the second was to try to create a poetic mood for my play, rather than to write poetry which could be 'recited' or 'delivered' on the stage. Besides, this particular play, being a comedy–call it dark or black comedy, in so far as it has a tragic ending–has required a different kind of verse. The poetic quality of comedy even in Shakespeare, has always been different from that of tragedy.

The second point concerns language. The Arabic reader might be shocked by the colloquialisms used, or the apparent 'prosaic' style of some parts in the dialogue. Certain expressions are indeed low, to the extent that they represent a prominent divergence from the traditional standards of 'poetic' language. This has been deliberate. Every work of art has its own rhetoric which modifies, I believe, the existing criteria of literary judgment. More eager to sustain the poetic mood than to present a collection of poeticisms, I maintained this 'low style' in certain parts as it arose naturally from the dramatic situation.

The third point concerns the narrator. The narrator is my own version of the Greek Chorus. A dramatic convention which should always be defended, the chorus is an essential part, I believe, of every drama. The tendency to regard the play as based on a story given entirely through *dialogue* has eroded the role

of the chorus. Realism, not to say naturalism, may have spelt the end of the chorus, though a good play may not be based on a good story-or may not contain any story at all. A play need not tell a story, otherwise Greek drama would have been stillborn. A drama may contain any and all levels of speech, regardless of whether it corresponded faithfully to 'our' standards of reality or not,

Having said that I must admit that my narrator is still a major character in my play. He is a kind of chorus, I have said, in the sense that he explains, comments and elucidates. This is, however, the least of his functions. His major function is that he represents all those not standing *on the stage.* That is why he stands on the edge. There is a killer on the stage facing his victim but there are others too who are neither killers nor victims (perhaps for a while), what about these? They laugh and play with words, enjoy their cheap witticisms. They don't think it beneath their dignity, I believe, to help the killer to get rid of the victim's body; they are the wits and scoundrels of our age.

Five years ago I made my personal discovery of Eugene Ionesco, when I saw his *Chairs* in Cairo. I devoured his works, subsequently, and for a while, believed I preferred his dramatic method to all others. A couple of years later, I wrote a play «The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj» which bore no resemblance whatsoever to any modern technique. This one, however, is different. There is Ionesco here–without a shadow of doubt.

Theatre of the absurd! Arabic translations of this word have given us two lines, both unsatisfactory: the first corresponds to the English 'irrational', the second to 'frivolous' (as opposed to 'serious'). Irrational!? Well, not in the sense of being against

'Reason' but rather against those modes of thinking dictated by the principle of logic. 'Frivolous' is quite disappointing–can anyone be 'frivolous' in this age, even if he tended to be frivolous by nature? The 'absurd' is not merely fantastic either–not fatuous, silly or insipid: it is the tendency to break the confines of rational logic in search of novel, fresh modes inspired by the 'spirit of reason'.

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